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AUTHOR McFadden, Emily Jean; Ryan, Patricia
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ABSTRACT

This paper briefly reviews current knowledge about child abuse in foster care, and presents preliminary findings from a study identifying characteristics of abused children by type of abuse, and type of abuse by behavior of the child. Research indicates that foster children at risk for abuse exhibit specific characteristics, such as having experienced multiple placements, or having special needs or handicapping conditions. Foster parents who maltreat children are typically older, more affluent, and more likely to be married than maltreating biological parents. Agency practices related to foster care abuse include making emergency placements, overloading foster homes, mismatching child and family, infrequent home visits, and lack of foster parent training. Analysis of 176 abuse incidents shows that certain children may be more vulnerable to abuse in family foster homes than others. Data strongly suggest that foster parents need help in understanding toileting behavior and the regression in this area that is likely to occur when a child undergoes trauma. Behaviors interpretable as direct challenges to adult authority were among those most likely to lead to physical abuse, especially those involving physical aggression or use of bad language toward the adult. If these children are to be safely placed, potential foster families must receive better training. (RH)

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ABUSE IN FAMILY FOSTER HOMES:

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VULNERABLE CHILD

by Emily Jean McFadden and
Patricia Ryan

presented by

Emily Jean McFadden, ACSW

Associate Director, Analyzing Abuse in Foster Care

Eastern Michigan University, USA

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for further information contact: National Foster Care Projects
Institute for the Study of Children & Families
Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, Michigan 48197 USA
(313) 487-0372

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ABUSE IN FAMILY FOSTER HOMES: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VULNERABLE CHILD

It is ironic that children removed from their families for their own protection are often victims of further maltreatment. Family foster care has been viewed in the past as a haven in which the maltreated child could benefit from the nurture and protection of an adequate family. Current research indicates that children are much less safe in family foster homes than was formerly believed (1). The effects of "foster care drift" or lack of permanence planning have been adequately documented as a risk to the child's emotional well being (2), but the harm done to children by their out-of-home caretakers' acts of omission and commission has only recently been acknowledged by the foster care system.

Eastern Michigan University has analyzed 164 cases of alleged abuse in family foster homes under a grant from the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect. The sample was drawn from allegations of abuse against foster families in five states during the period 1980-1984. Trained readers coded data from the investigation (incident) report, the child's record and the foster family's licensing record for each case. Data was collected on foster family structure and characteristics, child characteristics and history, and the level of agency services. The focus of this paper is on the characteristics of the child who is maltreated while in family foster care. We will briefly review the current knowledge about systemic and practice issues related to this problem. Then we will present the preliminary data on the characteristics of the children in our sample. Finally we will discuss implications for further research and practice.

INCIDENCE

A significant number of children are abused or maltreated while in family foster homes. The actual extent of abuse is not known. In order to ascertain the extent of foster family maltreatment, the National Foster Care Education Project at Eastern Michigan University surveyed all 50 states, which reported a total of 137,389 family foster homes. Each state was asked to specify the number of abuse complaints, and to report on procedures designed to prevent foster care abuse, or to handle substantiated cases. The survey results suggest a wide range of substantiated foster care abuse complaints.

Some states did not know the incidence of foster care abuse, and other states could not separate foster care abuse from other out-of-home placements, but of the 27 states able to provide data, the number of complaints range from 3 per 1000 foster homes to 67 per 1000 foster homes. The substantiated abuse complaints range from 2 per 1000 foster homes to 27 per 1000 foster homes. In four states, substantiated abuse rates were over 18 per 1000 foster homes (3). These figures compare with a study done of foster family abuse cases in New York City which suggests a rate of 8 substantiated abuse cases per 1000 children in care (4).

The National Analysis of Official Child Neglect and Abuse Reporting indicates that foster parents comprise 0.3% of perpetrators in substantiated abuse reports as compared with 0.1% perpetrators being institutional staff. Rindfleisch and Rabb report that complaints regarding residential facilities constituted 9% of all out-of-home care complaints (5).

Although the data base is limited, it is clear that abuse occurs in family foster homes as well as in institutions and in biological families. It is imperative that child welfare personnel relinquish their illusions of foster care as being safer than other settings, and acknowledge the need for protection of children in foster care.

CAUSES OF FAMILY FOSTER CARE ABUSE

The causes of abuse and neglect in family foster care are diverse. Foster families may be a select group within the general population of families but they still possess the vulnerabilities common to all families. These vulnerabilities are often exacerbated or compounded by the rigors of fostering. Foster families take on responsibilities which far exceed those of normal parenting, and encounter stressful situations engendered by the foster parenting role and lack of resources and supports from the agency. Board payments for foster children rarely cover the actual cost of caring for the child. It is often difficult to obtain adequate medical services for the child as fewer providers are willing to accept Medicaid. Agency monitoring represents an intrusion within the boundaries of family life. Foster families rarely feel that they have adequate input or decision making in the planning for the child. Feelings of frustration and helplessness often accompany the fostering role.

Families which are obviously abusive or inappropriate are excluded from fostering through the screening and homestudy which are part of the foster home licensure process. However, a chronic shortage of foster homes acts as a countervailing force to efforts to maintain or improve standards.

While licensing is a first line of defense in the prevention of foster care abuse, it is important to understand that not all foster care abuse occurs in inadequate families. To the contrary, while some foster care abuse occurs in homes that should never have been licensed, many foster care abuse cases occur in the "best foster families". Dawson found in a Canadian study that the highest incidence of maltreatment was with foster parents who had 5-6 years experience (6). Typically, these are families who have successfully parented their own children and have provided quality care to foster children with a variety of special needs. Because of their exceptional parenting skills, these foster families are overloaded with difficult, needy and provocative children. As tensions mount, work increases, and the child's behavior escalates, one of the foster parents "loses it" with a foster child. The agency intervenes to move the children, the home is decertified and a valuable resource is lost to the agency. The foster family faces a crisis of demoralization and may take years to recover from the loss of professional identity, self-esteem and sense of competence.

When examining the differences in dynamics between maltreatment in the general population, and foster care abuse, Bolton noted the following points:

-Maltreating foster parents are older than maltreating bio-parents

-Maltreating foster parents are more affluent and less likely to be on public assistance

-Maltreating foster parents are more likely to be married than maltreating bio-parents (7).

Although the foster family may seem more solidly established than the abusive biological family, it is deeply affected by agency practices such as overloading, and by the characteristics of the child. Some of the practices relating to foster care abuse are making "emergency placements" (8); the overloading of foster homes; failure to match a child with the foster family's abilities or preference; lack of home visits by workers; and lack of foster parent training (9).

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CHILD

Certain characteristics of the child appear in the contemporary literature to be a critical factor in foster care abuse, especially when combined with the stress that accompanies chronic overloading of the foster home. They will be discussed briefly to provide a context for the data presented here.

Foster parent abuse episodes are usually attempts to control behavior which appears to the foster parents to be bizarre, dangerous, difficult or defiant. The perception of the behavior depends on the context of foster family rules, expectations or definitions of what is acceptable behavior. For example, some foster parents can handle the problem of a child's fecal smearing or soiling while others would feel a loss of control when confronted with this activity.

Foster children bring with them into a foster home many interaction patterns learned in their own family or other foster families. They will continue to reenact these patterns--often maladaptively--and may draw the foster family into the negative interaction. Without training, casework support or consultation, foster parents find the behaviors baffling or inexplicable, or may find themselves enmeshed in a never ending cycle of a struggle for control.

Although many foster children, by virtue of earlier life experience fall into a general high risk category for further maltreatment, there are certain variables which contribute additional degrees of risk. The child who has experienced multiple placements is more likely to be maltreated (10). The child who is a permanent ward is more likely to be abused than the child who is temporarily in the system (11). The child is at high risk who is awaiting adoption by his foster family, but some part of the process has been delayed. The child who was placed in care for reasons of parental maltreatment is higher risk than the child placed for other reasons (12). The foster child with special needs or handicapping conditions requires both extra parenting skills and extra resources for the foster family (13). The child who has been sexually abused or exploited is doubly at risk, both for being sexually victimized again and for being physically abused by foster parents who can not cope with the sexualized behaviors displayed by the child (14). The adolescent, particularly one who has been previously abused, is also at high risk (15).

The present study will examine the characteristics of children who were maltreated in family foster care by the types of maltreatment. Although the most interesting comparison would be with the characteristics of children who were never abused in care, our data does not allow that comparison. We can, however, compare children subjected to different types of abuse.

TYPES OF MALTREATMENT STUDIED

Definitions of what constitutes maltreatment differ from state to state and from agency to agency. For instance in one state in our sample, the child protection act defines physical abuse solely as those behaviors likely to result in death, permanent injury or disfigurement of the child. Thus beatings on the buttocks resulting in bruises would not constitute physical abuse in that state. In several cases such behavior on the part of foster parents was found to be "inappropriate punishment" and a finding of "neglect" or "emotional abuse" was entered into the record. In most agencies there were several cases where the investigation focused on only some of the alleged maltreatments and there was no finding as to whether additional reported maltreatment had occurred. In a few cases, the child was removed after the allegation and there was no investigation, especially if the family decided not to continue fostering for the agency.

Consequently, any agency determination as to the likelihood that the maltreatment had occurred was non-standardized and often incomplete, making analysis impossible using the finding in the record. In order to determine the likelihood that the behavior had occurred, all allegations of maltreatment were recorded. Three coders independently read the detailed summaries of the investigation as recorded by the case readers. These three coders were also case readers and between them had read the majority of the cases. They ranked each allegation of maltreatment on a five point scale from "very likely to have happened" to "very unlikely to have happened." A middle category of "not ascertained" was used when there was no way to tell from the record if a behavior had or had not occurred. A ranking of "very likely to have happened" usually meant the foster parent admitted the behavior, that there were several independent witnesses, a physician determined that injury to the child resulted from deliberate abuse or the alleged perpetrator was being prosecuted for the alleged behavior.

The coders ranked 481 such behaviors. For 44% of the rankings, there was total agreement. In 51% of the cases, one coder differed from the others by one ranking category. In these cases the modal ranking was used. In 5% of the cases, there were three different rankings, all always immediately adjacent to one another. For these behaviors, the mean or middle ranking was used. The rankings of these behaviors were then used to develop a summary of the type of maltreatment each child in the sample was likely to have suffered. Careful examination of the rankings determined that in only 36 cases or 7.5% of the children, would use of the minority ranking of behavior resulted in that child being placed in a different category.

TABLE I

FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF CHILDREN LIKELY TO HAVE BEEN SUBJECTED TO MALTREATMENT

Type	N	% of Likely	% of Total
Neglect and Emotional Abuse Only	21	15.7%	11.9%
Sexual Abuse without Penetration	16	11.9%	9.1%
Sexual Abuse with Penetration	12	9.0%	6.8%
Physical Abuse without Marks or Injury	35	26.1%	19.9%
Physical Abuse with Marks or Injury	32	23.9%	18.2%
Other Punishment	8	6.0%	4.5%
Unexplained Injury	10	7.5%	5.7%
Total Likely to Have Experienced Some Maltreatment	134	100.1%	76.1%
Maltreatment not Ascertained	19	--	10.8%
Maltreatment Unlikely	23	--	13.1%
TOTAL SAMPLE	176	--	100.0%

Table I presents the frequency distribution for children placed in categories of likelihood of having suffered particular types of maltreatment. These categories are:

Neglect and Emotional Abuse Only: At least one form of neglect or emotional abuse was ranked as likely or very likely and no other type of maltreatment was so ranked. Children in this category showed signs of physical or other types of neglect or there was evidence that a foster parent had behaved in such a way as to cause emotional harm. Examples would be threatening the child, swearing at the child, or making nasty comments about the child's family.

Sexual Abuse Without Penetration: Some form of sexualized behavior which could be categorized as exploitive or neglectful was ranked as likely or very likely to have occurred but there was no evidence of genital or anal penetration or oral genital contact.

Sexual Abuse With Penetration: All children who had experienced genital or anal penetration or oral genital contact that was ranked as likely or very likely to have occurred were placed in this category.

Physical Abuse Without Mark or Injury: At least one form of physical contact which was deliberate and could have caused pain or harm to the child was ranked as likely or very likely but the child had no marks or injuries attributed to the contact.

Physical Abuse With Mark or Injury: At least one form of behavior resulted in the child having bruises or more serious injury. Any child with such a indicator was placed in this category and not the previous one even if additional behaviors not resulting in a mark or injury had occurred.

Other Punishment: The coders determined it was likely or very likely the child had been subjected to another form of punishment. Examples are being made to drink urine, being locked out of the house in the dark, being made to sleep in the basement.

Unexplained Injury: Children were placed in this category when they had suffered an injury but it could not be determined the foster parent's level of responsibility, if any, for the injury.

Maltreatment Not Ascertained: No form of maltreatment listed was ranked as likely or very likely to have happened and for at least one alleged behavior it could not be determined whether this behavior occurred.

Maltreatment Unlikely: Only children for whom all of the alleged behaviors were ranked as unlikely or very unlikely were placed in this category.

"Neglect and emotional abuse," "maltreatment not ascertained," and "maltreatment unlikely" are mutually exclusive and children in these categories are not found in any other category. Similarly "sexual abuse without penetration" and "sexual abuse with penetration" are mutually exclusive as are "physical abuse without mark or injury" and "physical abuse with mark or injury." The other categories are not mutually exclusive and a

child might be placed in more than one category (e.g., physical abuse without mark or injury and other punishment). Twelve children were placed in two categories on this basis so that the tables in this paper report 176 cases rather than 164.

Table II presents selected characteristics of the children by the category of likely behavior they suffered. This presentation is preliminary and any conclusions must await a more sophisticated analysis. However, there are a few interesting trends in the data. Those children who experienced sexual abuse appear to be slightly older than other children and more likely to be female and to be white. Black children are more likely to be represented in the neglect category than expected from their distribution in the sample. Males are over represented in the category of physical abuse with mark or injury. Although the number of children who were sexually abused is small, there does seem to be a pattern suggesting that children brought into care because of prior sexual abuse or exploitation are at risk of being sexually exploited in the foster home. This pattern does not hold up for sexual abuse with penetration.

In attempting to code for handicapping conditions of the children, the case readers found very little information. When a child was in special education classes, the reason for being there was not always indicated and records seldom included a copy of the educational plan for the child. In a number of cases, dictation suggested that a child had a number of problems but the labels used were vague and there was only occasional documentation that the labels were based on a professional diagnosis. For this reason, special education was used as an indicator of a handicapping condition since federal law requires that children only be placed in such class situations after an appropriate diagnostic workup. In a few cases medical or other records indicated that children had a specific condition even though they were not in special education.

TRIGGER BEHAVIORS

Relatively little research has focused on the types of behaviors that might trigger abuse. Granted that abuse is never an appropriate response to a child's behavior, it is still useful to identity those behaviors that appear to be most likely to lead adults into abusive behaviors, especially adults such as foster parents who do not have a history of abuse. The child's behaviors that led to the behaviors that were rated as likely or very likely are presented in Table III. The most frequent category is that of wetting or soiling pants or bed. Two of these children were very handicapped adolescents. One was eight and three were six years old. All the others were four or under. General disobedience, bad language (usually toward an adult), and being aggressive toward an adult, together compromise a significant proportion of the behaviors. These might be combined into a category of failure to respect status differences between children and adults. In many cases the behavior itself was trivial but the adult became upset when the child did not obey. In other cases the abuse apparently occurred after many instances of disobedience.

TABLE II

SELECTED CHILD CHARACTERISTICS BY LIKELY TYPE OF MALTREATMENT

Characteristic	Neglect and Emotional Abuse Only	Sexual Abuse without Penetration	Sexual Abuse with Penetration	Physical Abuse w/o Marks or Injury	Physical Abuse w/ Marks or Injury	Other Punishment	Unexplained Injury	Total Likely to have Experienced Some Maltreatment	Maltreatment not Ascertained	Maltreatment Unlikely	TOTAL SAMPLE
N	21	16	12	35	32	8	10	134	19	23	176
Age											
Mean Age (Std. Deviation)	8.0 (6.3)	12.1 (3.4)	13.8 (5.3)	10.6 (4.5)	8.6 (4.9)	7.0 (4.8)	4.0 (3.9)	9.5 (5.3)	7.2 (5.8)	7.2 (5.0)	8.9 (5.4)
Sex											
% Female	47.6%	87.5%	83.3%	48.6%	37.5%	12.5%	50.0%	51.5%	68.4%	60.9%	54.5%
Race											
% White	28.6%	62.5%	75.0%	45.7%	56.3%	62.5%	50.0%	51.5%	26.3%	34.8%	46.6%
% Black	47.7%	18.8%	8.3%	34.3%	34.4%	25.0%	50.0%	32.8%	57.9%	60.9%	39.2%
% Other	14.3%	12.5%	16.7%	20.0%	3.1%	12.5%	—	11.9%	10.5%	4.3%	10.8%
% Not Ascertained	9.5%	6.3%	—	—	6.3%	—	—	3.7%	5.3%	—	3.4%
Major Reason Child Brought into Care											
Physical Abuse	19.0%	25.0%	41.7%	28.6%	18.8%	25.0%	20.0%	24.6%	10.5%	43.5%	25.6%
Sexual Abuse	—	31.3%	16.7%	5.7%	12.5%	—	20.0%	11.2%	10.5%	13.0%	11.4%
Child's Behavior or Condition	—	6.3%	—	2.9%	9.4%	—	10.0%	4.5%	5.3%	—	4.0%
Neglect or Emotional Abuse	66.7%	18.8%	33.3%	45.7%	46.9%	50.0%	40.0%	44.8%	63.2%	34.8%	45.4%
Other or Not Ascertained	14.3%	18.8%	8.3%	17.1%	12.5%	25.0%	10.0%	14.9%	10.5%	8.7%	13.6%

TABLE II, page 2

SELECTED CHILD CHARACTERISTICS BY LIKELY TYPE OF MALTREATMENT

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Prior Placements											
Mean Number	1.43	1.44	3.67[a]	2.09	1.28	2.75	0.70	1.79	1.53	1.26	1.69
(Std. Deviation)	(1.63)	2.31	(8.45)	(2.49)	(1.30)	(2.19)	(0.68)	(3.12)	(1.35)	(1.25)	(2.80)
Child's Legal Status at Time of Alleged Maltreatment											
Temporary Custody	81.0%	68.8%	91.7%	77.1%	71.9%	100.0%	100.0%	79.9%	89.5%	82.6%	81.3%
Permanent Custody	19.0%	6.3%	—	8.6%	18.8%	—	—	10.4%	10.5%	4.3%	9.7%
Other and not Ascertained	—	25.0%	8.3%	14.3%	9.4%	—	—	9.7%	—	13.0%	9.1%
Months in Foster Care											
Mean Number	29.4	21.3	34.2	43.3	24.7	41.8	6.2	30.5	34.4	24.3	30.1
(Std. Deviation)	(52.4)	(27.3)	(32.4)	(52.1)	(33.9)	(68.2)	(4.1)	(43.8)	(68.6)	(28.4)	(45.3)
Months in this Foster Home											
Mean Number	12.7	10.8	17.2	29.9	22.0	14.4	5.9	19.0	22.2	16.7	19.1
(Std. Deviation)	(22.3)	(8.4)	(14.5)	(45.0)	(37.0)	(13.0)	(4.0)	(31.4)	(43.7)	(22.4)	(31.9)
% in Special Ed.	23.8%	6.3%	25.0%	31.4%	31.2%	12.5%	10.0%	22.4%	10.5%	13.0%	19.9%
% with other handicapping condition (not in Special ed.)	9.5%	—	—	8.6%	12.5%	12.5%	10.0%	7.5%	10.5%	13.0%	8.5%

[a] Includes one child with 30 placements. If this child is excluded, the mean for this category would be 1.27.

TABLE III

CHILD'S BEHAVIOR THAT APPEARED TO TRIGGER MALTREATMENT BY TYPE OF LIKELY MALTREATMENT
(When the Trigger Behavior Could be Determined -
Some Children Had More Than One Such Behavior.)

Behavior	Physical Abuse without Marks or Injury	Physical Abuse with Marks or Injury	Other Punishment	Unexplained Injury	Total
Wetting or soiling pants or bed	16.3%	10.0%	33.0%	25.0%	17.4%
Disobedience	10.8%	26.7%	6.7%	--	15.1%
Aggressive Toward Adult	2.7%	13.3%	--	--	5.8%
Aggressive Toward Another Child	13.5%	3.3%	--	25.0%	8.1%
Bad Language	8.1%	6.6%	6.7%	--	7.0%
Temper, Out of Control	8.1%	10.0%	20.0%	--	10.5%
Lying	5.4%	--	--	--	2.3%
Stealing	5.4%	3.3%	6.7%	--	4.7%
Destructiveness	10.8%	3.3%	6.7%	--	7.0%
School problems	5.4%	3.3%	6.7%	25.0%	5.8%
Other[a]	13.5%	20.0%	13.3%	25.0	16.3%
TOTAL	100.0%	99.8%	99.8%	100.0%	100.0%
N	35	30	15	4	86

[a] Although this category constitutes a large percentage of the cases, it does not include any number of cases that could easily or logically grouped together.

CONCLUSIONS

This preliminary analysis does suggest that certain children may be more vulnerable to abuse in family foster homes than others. Further analysis in this area will concentrate on the attempt to identify combinations of characteristics and behaviors that put these children at high risk. A great many questions have yet to be answered. Additional analysis can respond to at least some of these. Certainly the role of the agency and the extent to which the stresses children were placing on families had been recognized will be an important variable in attempting to determine policies that might prevent repetition of these cases. In the meantime, the data do strongly suggest that foster parents need help in understanding toileting behavior and the regression in this area that is likely to occur when a child undergoes trauma.

Although any type of behavior may be seen as a control issue, certainly many parents view toilet training as gaining control over the child. The other forms of behavior which were most likely to lead to physical abuse were also behaviors where the child might be seen to directly challenge adult authority. This is especially true when the child is physically aggressive to the adult or uses bad language toward the adult. Yet many children placed in family foster care behave in these ways fairly often. The reports of their behaviors are in the record and have sometimes been the basis for past disruptions. If these children are to be placed in homes with any assurance that they will not be further harmed, a good deal more work will have to be done with potential foster families.

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